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Essay

By BECKY WILDMAN-TOBRINER*

WHEN CATHARINE WELLS asked me if I would write something for my Mom¹ in this law review, I was very excited. Mom taught me to write and to appreciate the power of writing as far back as the sixth grade when she first explained to me how to “road map” ideas through a five paragraph essay. It is fitting for me to use the written word to perpetuate discussion and pay homage to the amazing woman who has taught me so much. Ironically, this is the first important piece of my writing that we have not discussed.

As a child, she helped me learn about the injustice of historical events such as slavery, the holocaust, and atomic bombs, and offered me a consoling shoulder to cry on. Now that I am older, Mom shares with me the ideas that she writes about, such as racism and sexism. Our conversations teach me the values that emanate from her bottomless heart, the values that often inform my response to different situations.

A number of our discussions have taken place while driving home from school. I distinctly remember the car ride when she told me about a law review article she was writing about racism and white privilege. I listened attentively and asked many questions as she explained her views. I remember disagreeing with my mother’s definition of racism. At the time, I could not understand how she could say all white people were racist; I didn’t think that I was racist. My perspective has since changed.

Last year, my high school was the scene of a racial hate crime. Someone wrote derogatory epithets in a women’s bathroom stall, referring to African-American, Latino, and Chinese people, saying they “don’t belong.” Some of the hateful words were even written in blood.

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1. I have always taken for granted the fact that my mom is my MOM. I can actually remember when I was taken aback by someone calling her “Stephanie.” Her name is “Mom,” I thought. I asked my mom what “Stephanie” was about. She explained the concept of names and “moms” willingly and openly. Even as a child my Mom provided honest explanations that helped broaden my point of view. My Mom’s public work has done the same for her peers and students. I am proud of her for that.

On the day students learned of the incident, teachers canceled afternoon classes, and the whole school community joined in an assembly and sat, cried, and talked about race and exclusion. At one point, some students of color said that they saw those hateful words every day when they looked into white people's eyes. Many white students were hurt by this statement and became defensive.

I found myself thinking about my Mom. I replayed dialogues from our car trips in my head, and I began to realize that she was correct. White people view the world through a different lenses than do people of color.

Recently, I read the article Mom wrote with our friend Trina Grillo.² They wrote about how having cancer filters a cancer patient's vision of life and how "[t]he cancer patient does not have the privilege of truly forgetting about her cancer; even when it is not in the forefront of her thoughts, it remains in the background, coloring her world."³ Trina and my mom compare a cancer patient's awareness of her cancer to the way that racism and white supremacy force people of color to look at the world through the filter of race.⁴ On the other hand, they point out that racism and white supremacy allows whites not to look at the world through a filter of racial awareness and that the privilege of being able "to ignore their race gives whites a societal advantage distinct from any advantage received from the existence of discriminatory racism."⁵

Thinking about Mom's work made me realize we must listen to what others are saying and detach our sensitivity from the issues that make us uncomfortable. If, for example, a white person takes personal offense in a circumstance such as this hate crime, and jumps to say she is not racist, then she fails to listen. If she believes she experiences no conscious animosity and, therefore, expends energy defending herself as a white person, she filters out some of what she could potentially hear. Guided by these concepts, I wrote an op-ed piece for the high school paper about the hate crime:

Students of color have said that they see those hateful words every-day, symbolically, when they look into white people's eyes. Many whites felt hurt when they heard this. In spite of these strong emo-

2. See Trina Grillo & Stephanie M. Wildman, *Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Implication of Making Comparisons Between Racism and Sexism (or Other -Isms)*, 1991 DUKE L.J. 397.

3. *Id.* at 397-98.

4. See *id.*

5. *Id.*

tions that white students felt, I now believe—every white person is racist.

I will sadly say that I, as a white person, am racist. I benefit every single day from the privilege of being white. I have advantages that I am often not aware of because I am white.

This privilege makes me racist. I use the term racist because it is necessary to use it if we are ever going to solve the problem of discrimination. Generally, in society, we assume a racist person is someone who uses hateful speech, who would have supported the Confederate Army, or who snubs any person of color. I disagree with this definition of the word racism. "Racism" is a powerful word: it gets attention, and it even gets white people's attention. Most white people will say, "hell no, I'm not racist"; [if the definition of racism is limited to active hatred], this is true, we are not. However, when a white person says, "I'm not racist," he or she is saying that he or she is not part of the problem. If they are not *causing* the problem, they assume that racism is not *their* problem. If white people avoid the issues surrounding racism, we can never advance toward a solution.

Whites are beneficiaries of the system privileging whiteness. I believe we need to say "I am racist" and accept that. Only then can we associate racial problems as our own and work together [toward a solution].⁶

I believe some of the lack of understanding at my school was due to different vocabularies and different interpretations of the words we can use to describe the privilege afforded white people. I feel some people might have had similar ideas, but had trouble communicating because there is a lack of common language for these problems. I now understand why Mom has worked on creating a language for people to use to speak about issues, trying to define concepts such as "racism" and "privilege" in ways to which everyone can relate.

In addition to working on creating a common language, Mom has also tried to create a classroom where students can express themselves and yet still hear everyone else. A passage from bell hooks's book, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, which I have read for my Educational Thought class, reminds me so much of Mom:

Despite the focus on diversity, our desires for inclusion, many professors still teach in classrooms that are predominantly white. Often a spirit of tokenism prevails in those settings. This is why it is so crucial that "whiteness" be studied, understood, discussed—so that everyone learns that affirmation of multiculturalism, and an unbiased inclusive perspective, can and should be present whether

6. Becky Wildman-Tobriner, *Student Commentary*, LICK-WILMERDING HIGH SCHOOL, EXTRA EDITION: PAPER TIGER, Mar. 1999, at 6–7.

or not people of color are present. Transforming these classrooms is as great a challenge as learning how to teach well in the setting of diversity.⁷

When my Educational Thought class began to discuss hooks's work, the professor wanted to put hooks's theory into practice. He agreed that "[m]aking the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute [was] a central goal of transformative pedagogy."⁸ He also thought that to "build 'community'" teachers should "value . . . each individual voice"⁹ by talking to students about personal experiences and creating a feeling of engaged learning. My professor talked about his many childhood experiences for the rest of the class period.

I became very frustrated by his response. Yes, I thought, hooks believes that everyone's personal experiences contribute to educational gain, however, she emphasizes the professor-student relationship should be a two-way street.¹⁰ My professor's lecture, although interesting, did not have any real connection to hooks' suggested pedagogy.

These kinds of educational experiences have taught me how much I miss being exposed to my Mom's insights on a daily basis. I would like to have my Mom as a teacher. I remember when I was about five, I told my Mom, "Someday I can go to USF and be in your class." It was the highest compliment that I knew how to give.

In her book, hooks also says:

As a child, . . . I was desperately trying to discover the place of my belonging. I was desperately trying to find my way home. How I envied Dorothy her journey in *The Wizard of Oz*, that she could travel to her worst fears and nightmares only to find at the end that "there is no place like home."¹¹

The new shoes in which I find myself are like Dorothy's. My world view for the past few months as I started college has been filtered through a lens of homesickness. But I realize I am fortunate to be homesick. It is the result of being privileged enough to go to the college of my choice on the east coast and of being fortunate enough to have loving family and friends to miss in San Francisco.

7. BELL HOOKS, *TEACHING TO TRANSGRESS: EDUCATION AS THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM* 43 (1994).

8. *Id.* at 39.

9. *Id.* at 40.

10. *See id.* She contrasts her approach to teaching with the more common method of treating students like "passive consumers" of education. *Id.*

11. *Id.* at 60-61.

When applying to colleges, I wrote an essay in response to the question: If you were to write a book, what would it be about, and why? In my response I wrote:

The book will entertain questions that will guide my protagonist's growth and development. How can a girl develop a strong sense of herself as she grows up in an historically male world? How can she control her fears and turn them into strengths? How can my protagonist, a young, white female, a member of the racial majority, be a supporter and a listener? How can she promote positive change in the world as well as in her own environment? Is it possible for religion to help people through hardship, given the tragedy that the world has seen as a result of religious persecution? How does she, personally, fit into the fabric of life? Can she weave her way in? How can she deal with cliques, friendship, school, develop her values, stick up for herself and her moral principles? These are all only one millionth of the questions a growing girl asks.

I don't have the answers to these questions. I plead guilty: I'm not God. What I do know is that I can write about my experiences and lend a hand to others to help walk them through the challenge of growing up.

Now when I look at that essay I realize the book I want to write mirrors the role that my Mom has played in my life; she guides my growth and development and helps me walk through the challenges of growing up. Mom has always been my role model, but I've only recently been able to verbalize it. She is an author, a teacher, and a caregiver with a social conscience. Well . . . that's what I want to be when I grow up. And believe me, I'm working on it.

